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15 March 1963
MEMORANDUM FOR Mr. McGeorge Bundy
background remarks
background briefing

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON 25, D.C.

This is in response to your request for an addendum to our "Missile Gap" memorandum to the President. You asked that we focus on precisely what happened in January-February 1961 which led to Mr. McNamara's background remarks on the non-existence of a missile gap. In terms of additional intelligence or a reappraisal of Soviet or U.S. strength, the fact is that nothing happened. As noted in our previous memorandum, the term "missile gap" was an extremely fuzzy one, and it was almost impossible to discuss the subject without saying something which was misleading, or at least sure to be interpreted in a misleading way. In short, there was, and was not, a missile gap in early 1961, depending on whether you included POLARIS or not; whether you were worried that the Air Force estimate might be right or not; whether you were thinking of a strategically significant gap or merely a comparison of raw numbers, regardless of the practical significance; and whether you were talking about something now or something we feared was coming. It was under these circumstances that reporters came away from Mr. McNamara's background briefing with the impression that he had said there was no gap.

Given the disinclination of the Secretary of Defense to say anything to imply that the U.S. was no longer confident it could defend its vital interests, and taking into account the stories by responsible observers suggesting the contrary, it is not surprising that the Secretary took this line. (See, for example, Richard Rovere's Letter from Washington for 11 January 1961, which is attached.) For, given the confusions in which the whole "missile gap" controversy was immersed, the Secretary could not say anything without being misleading, and he naturally preferred to lean towards the chance of being misinterpreted on the side of confidence in U.S. ability to defend itself.

If we are asked, in a political context, what was the difference between Mr. McNamara denying there was a gap and the Eisenhower Administration saying the same thing, the answer is this: Under Eisenhower, the denial that there was no gap was accompanied by a

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beliefs, at the highest levels, that our defense posture was adequate; under the new Administration, the denial was accompanied by an intense awareness that although we were not in immediate great danger, urgent immediate steps were nevertheless needed to improve our defense position. Thus, although there was little difference in what Defense officials said about the missile gap before and after January 1961, there were major differences in what was done about the missile gap and the whole range of defense deficiencies which this term had come to symbolize.



Adam Farmolinsky

Attachment